

## **Sunday 20 November 2005: Christ the King**

### **Power and Glory**

#### **Readings: Ephesians 1: 15-23; Matthew 25: 31-46**

‘The problem was to give birth to a boy and not to a girl’. Those were the somewhat sexist words of the physicist Robert Jungk, spoken many years ago, when he was talking about the difficulty of bringing the subcritical masses of Uranium 235 into contact so as to generate an atomic explosion rather than a mere radioactive fizzle.

Other physicists, military men and journalists were using similar metaphors in the decade of the development of the atomic and hydrogen bombs. The bomb at Hiroshima was code-named ‘Little Boy’ and that at Nagasaki ‘Fat Boy’. The result of the first A-bomb test was described by the words ‘Babies satisfactorily born’ and a reporter described that explosion as ‘the first cry of a new-born world ... the birth of a new force.’ Edward Teller was hailed as the ‘father’ of the H-bomb and announced its first test outcome with the words ‘It’s a boy’.

We might, perhaps, feel at least somewhat uneasy to greet the development of such a devastating weapon with language similar to that of the miracle of the birth of a new baby but the scientists might reply ‘I didn’t mean that’.

Language matters and language changes. The words we use may have a stronger and more potent impact than we may imagine. Words can delight, words can hurt and dismay, words can inform and words can mislead.

The author of the letter to the Ephesians writes ‘I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom...’ he talks of ‘the riches of his glorious inheritance’ and ‘the working of his great power and of God putting that power to work in Christ’. The gospel describes the Son of Man coming in his glory and sitting on the throne of his glory.

The words ‘power’ and ‘glory’ are clearly intended to have a very positive impact but if the Church today proclaims God or Christ’s ‘power and glory’ especially in relation to kingship then the world ‘out there’ may well be misled, for today both words carry a rather pejorative undertone. People may associate glory with vanity, wealth or greed and to glorify something as being to gloat. Those are probably not qualities that most would want to find linked to the church so what might the world understand if we speak of God as ‘Father of Glory’?.

Likewise power. A word frequently linked now with abuse, with domination of strong over less strong, with riding rough-shod over people and as something wielded at the expense of others. In a recent interview Bishop Gene Robinson spoke of politicians using their power for the wrong reasons. So, what is God’s power – working in Christ? How can we re-discover the true meaning, for us and for the world, when the words have become so tarnished?

Today we celebrate Christ the King but what, realistically, might that convey to non church-goers – even if sympathetic – friends, family, neighbours or colleagues? . It’s perhaps not surprising that even thinking and informed people find it increasingly difficult to relate to, or even trust, the language of the church and of scripture because it may seem to contradict, both what they hope and expect from those things, and also their own experience and knowledge.

Moses said to God 'Please show me your glory'. In Hebrew, the word for glory means the weight or value of something. So the glory of God means his weight or worth – his true self, his true being, what he really is, what shines out of him so that we can see it. And when we see it and recognise it, even if only dimly, it can impel us to worship and glorify. And the glory that is God – but that we may find so hard to grasp and to articulate – is focussed in Jesus. 'When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne in his glory.' But that is also the Son of Man to be found in the person who is hungry or thirsty, who is a stranger or unclothed, sick or in prison. There the glory is still.

And not only in us, but in the natural world. A retired bishop writes, 'But this glory is not only revealed in human beings. It's written into all nature. I see it every day in the vegetables growing in my garden. Carrots and cabbages, broad beans, dwarf beans and runner beans, leeks and purple sprouting broccoli. Each one declaring the glory of God by being itself and all declaring it together by their variety.'

He looks to see where the glory might be found in human history and chooses the modern city as illustration. A complex whole where problems and suffering meet – pollution, homelessness, violence, poverty – as recent events in France and Bradford surely remind us that we belong to each other and in that lies the glory – not in vanity, greed or wealth.

It is God's glory that has the power to transform and to open our eyes, 'the eye of the heart' to new ways of seeing which make possible new ways of doing.

And then power. To return to Moses for a moment – he clearly knew what power was all about. He's overcome the enemy, brought down plagues on the nation, drawn water from a rock and parted the sea. He was a powerful figure. He could have been a tyrant – harsh and authoritarian – but he had a spirituality of power that prevented that.

Moses understood that power is from God and is to be used for the things of God. He contemplated it in the burning bush. He heard it on the mountain top. But he knew that that wasn't his power and it wasn't to be hoarded but to be given away.

That spirituality of power is seen at its ultimate in Jesus 'I was hungry and you gave me food ... I was in prison and you visited me ... I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink.... I was a stranger and you welcomed me...' God's power is not meant to keep people down but to build them up. It's meant not to punish but to challenge. It's meant not for the few but for the whole people.

There is a scale that divides power into five kinds. That every act of power is either exploitative, competitive, manipulative, integrative or nurturing. In the first three categories power is used to destroy. Exploitative power – power over another. Competitive power – power against another. Manipulative power – power that controls another, though often disguised. Through these uses of power we destroy others, ourselves and our world. Power is being misused all around us and most of us have probably been participators in that ourselves at some time or other.

But the power of God, as expressed in Christ and highlighted on this Sunday when we face the paradox of 'Christ the King' is the power to integrate, to nurture and to challenge. The power that, as we read in Ephesians 'God put to work in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places'. The power that leads the righteous to say 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food or thirsty and gave you something to drink?

When was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you? And the King replies ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me’.

In this years’ Advent booklet the concepts of power and glory are explored – seen in both a secular and Christian context. Rather as we may have opened the windows of an Advent Calendar as children not quite knowing what may lie underneath we’re offered here, on a daily basis, something of the range, diversity and complexity of these ideas on which to reflect and pray as we move towards the simple setting of the birth of the one who was to embody for the world the real and true meaning of those words.